Mill's *Utilitarianism*

Chapters I and II

Teleological Morality

- First, Mill thinks all *proper* moral theories are **teleological**: *"the good is defined independently from the right, and **then** the right is defined as that which maximizes the good"* (Rawls, *Theory of Justice* 21-2). "Good" may be utility, perfection, etc.
- As Mill himself says:
  - "All action is for the sake of some end [*telos*], and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their **whole** character and colour from the end to which they are *subservient"* (132);
  - "…the question concerning the *summum bonum* [i.e., highest good], or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality…" (131).
- Second and relatedly, he makes *short work* of **non**-teleological theories (moral-sense theory [132], Kantianism [134], etc.) — which is quite amusing in light of a later comment about how people often criticize theories that they haven't taken the time to understand properly (153)! **(like Bentham, *in this respect*…)**

Mill's Utilitarianism

- Mill gives the Greatest Happiness Principle (GHP) *initially* as follows:

  > [A]ctions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. (137)

- This quotation and some of the succeeding text ***appear*** to indicate that Mill's utilitarianism is orthodox Benthamite:
  - ✓**hedonistic** (happiness defined as "pleasure," a positive feeling)
  - ✓**direct** (142: "*directive* rule of human conduct"; ***cf. 149-51, 169-***)
  - ✓**act** ("actions" rather than rules; ***cf. 155-7***)
- Soon, though, Mill ***dispels*** this impression by defining and defending his highly unorthodox **qualitative hedonism**, a form of hedonism that would have been rejected by both Bentham and Sidgwick (138-42; **restates** the GHP at 142).

Qualitative Hedonism

- *Two* key features:

1. Absolute priority of higher over lower pleasures.

a. Priority: "pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments" (linked to the "higher faculties") ranked above those of "mere sensation" ("animal appetites") (138; "sense of *dignity"* [140]; cf. **Plato**).

b. Absolute: "…would not resign it for **any quantity** of the other pleasure..." (139). *{**proviso:** if necessary condition…}*

c. Not a simple descriptive claim: counterexamples. Rather:

2. "Competent judges" to rank these types (140, 142).

a. "the test of **quality**, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by ***those*** *who, in their* ***opportunities of experience****, to which must be added their* ***habits of self-consciousness and self-observation****, are best furnished with the means of comparison*." **(Socrates v. fool)**

b. Important role thus granted to "experts," but they are **not** to be granted coercive powers: "all [they] can claim is, freedom to point out the way" (74 [*On Liberty* {OL}]; cf. **Nietzsche**).

Crypto-perfectionism?

- The great intuitive appeal of hedonism is that it focuses our attention on *increasing the pleasure and* ***reducing the pain*** *of "the whole sentient creation" (143)*—which strikes *most* people as plausibly a *part* of (if not the *whole* of) morality.
- Presumably, however, the pleasure/pain that *most* people have in mind at this point is pleasure/pain *as it is* ***actually*** *experienced by sentient beings*. {e.g., poem v. doughnut}
- But the pleasure/pain that Mill has in mind is pleasure/pain *as it* ***should*** *be experienced by sentient beings*, that is, as it ***would*** *be experienced by them if they were "competent judges."* But of course they are not, or rather rarely are.
- This puts Mill in the strange position of favorably judging an action that ***would*** *increase pleasure* for "competent judges" but ***actually*** *increases* ***pain*** for sentient beings **as they are**.
- Sidgwick (see, e.g., ME 127-8) would accuse Mill of making qualitative hedonism a stalking horse for his *perfectionism*.

In Defense of Mill as Hedonist

- Mill would not accept the characterization of his theory as “crypto-perfectionist”: he would stress that pleasure and pain are still the *ultimate* standards of judgment and that his theory is therefore hedonistic at base.
- *Qualitative* hedonism, he would argue, is simply what hedonism looks like once we have arrived at a properly *elevated* conception of utility: “it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on *the permanent interests of man as a* ***progressive being***” (OL 15). ***{letter/spirit?}***
- Relatedly, Mill highlights the vital need for “mental cultivation” and “mental culture,” so that “*everyone* born in a civilized country” may experience the higher pleasures (145; also see OL 116-9 on the necessity of universal, state-subsidized [***not*** state-run] education).
- Qualitative hedonism is in *this* sense, at least, ***inclusive***.

Act…or Rule?

- Mill considers it a *smear* against utilitarians to claim that they "endeavour to test *each individual action* directly by the first principle [i.e., the GHP]" (156; cf. **Bentham, act-utilitarian**)
- He argues that this would be not only practically impossible but also pointless because "mankind [has already learned] by experience the tendencies of actions," both prudentially and morally, which is why we consider whole *categories* of action (e.g., murder, assault, theft) to be wrong, i.e., infelicific (155).
- Thus, Mill says that utilitarianism *necessarily* endorses the use of **rules** that are "secondary" as well as "subordinate" to the first principle of utilitarianism (GHP) **as practical guides for our behavior**—at *minimum* as "rules of thumb" (156-7).
- This ***apparently*** marks Mill as a rule-utilitarian; recall Lyons' discussion of rule- v. act-utilitarianism, however: ***the former is simply the latter subject to information constraints*.**

Direct…or Indirect?

- This *rule* utilitarianism is still a form of *direct* utilitarianism, in which GHP is both the immediate **standard** and the **motive** for action that is consistent with felicific rules.
- At 149-51 and especially later (**169-: next lecture**), however, Mill starts to move toward an *indirect* form of utilitarianism, in which GHP is the ultimate (if not the proximate) standard but **not** the sole or even the primary motive.
- As he says at 149, to believe that utilitarianism demands that people should always act from the motive of "promoting the general interests of society…is to mistake the very meaning of a ***standard*** of morals, and to confound the rule of action with the ***motive*** behind it. It is the business of ethics to tell us what our duties are…but no system of ethics insists that the *sole* motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty" (149).
- ***Private*** persons may and likely should be motivated, not by the "general interests of society," but rather by the interests of "particular persons" they are *able* to help or harm (150-1).